

Engaging joyfully in a holistic approach to comprehensive education on nutrition and farming

Quarter 1 Service Story

Catherine Masters

December 2021

Serving in the AmeriCorps Farm to School program has been a continuously joyful and engaging experience. In the first few weeks it felt like being caught up in a whirlwind; there are a lot of facets to the role of being a Farm to School specialist, and it took me a while to settle into the wide array of responsibilities. However, after some time, I came to realize that I was grateful to have so many interesting components of this job, all of which add up to a rather holistic approach to a comprehensive education on nutrition and farming.

Nutrition Education

The nutrition education component has been an aspect of this role that I have come to appreciate, not only for the impact it is having on the communities I serve, but also for my own life. I was already a rather careful consumer, but having access to the UU Nutrition Course as well as teaching the importance of nutrition to students has only heightened my own care around food. Knowing the merits of eating a wider variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and proteins, and seeing the impacts in my own life, has made it easy for me to impress upon the students the importance of good nutrition. It's exciting to see the transformation of most students knowing very little about the food groups, the variety of healthy food there is, the importance of building healthy habits, and where food comes from, to becoming little experts. It's a joy when a student tells me their family has tried a recipe I've sent home, or are excited to hang up a handout on "Eating the Rainbow" or composting on their fridge at home. I always encourage the students to teach their families about what they've learned in class, and have encouraged the families in the monthly newsletters to cook at home with the kids. I have had so many students as the weeks have gone by express to me increased excitement around talking about food and learning about the garden. I am looking forward to the spring when I can work in more nutrition lessons into the garden space as it grows!

Changing the School Food Environment

I love being a gardener and having two school gardens I can use as playgrounds. I find genuine joy in weeding, watering, watching little seeds or seedlings grow into food-producing plants, tending to the soil, and harvesting food that was grown so easily! To me it really is magic, and it's a sense of magic I believe I have begun to share with my students. I'm excited to see how much more I can share with them once the garden begins growing again and I can take classes out there for them to really see it all happen, and for them to feel accomplished in growing food with their own effort and care. In my experience, there are few things as rewarding as growing your own food. I've been sharing what enthusiasm I can in these cold months through lessons about compost and bees, two of my favorite things, that students have likewise expressed interest and care in. It's amazing how you can have a group of students who think bees are gross/scary, who then after learning about what fascinating creatures they are, become bee fans!

Although the garden work has been great, there are a considerable amount of setbacks for us working in Madison about getting local foods into the school lunches and snacks. MMSD has a strong hold on what goes into the lunches, especially during COVID, and they are so busy they don't have a lot of time to consider our invitations to meet and talk. I'm hoping that through the schools seeing the impact of the nutrition courses, they will become advocates for change alongside us AmeriCorps service members to increase the amount of local foods served in the Madison public schools.

Faculty from both schools have made beautiful displays about nutrition education in their hallways, inspired by the program. I consider this a success in many ways! I'm glad that the schools have been inspired by the program and want to emphasize the lessons of good health outside of my classes.

I've had the opportunity to tour a couple of farms and edit together little "Virtual Farm Field Trips" which I've enjoyed creating. I hope to have more opportunities to tour farms in the future, and give the students as many little tastes of farm life as possible!

Increasing Community Capacity

I am fortunate enough to be serving in schools who already have engaged, enthusiastic "Green Teams". The Green Teams at both schools are comprised of staff and PTO members who are invested in the success of the garden and outdoor education, as well as increasing the eco-sustainability of their schools. It has been easy to adopt them as Farm to School Task Force members, as they already are doing that good work! I'm glad to be a voice among them advocating for specific elements of the Farm to School program that aren't vocalized without me, such as emphasizing nutrition education and finding ways to integrate that into other parts of the school outside of my classes.

The Green Teams are already very good at organizing and attracting volunteers to help in the garden spaces. There have been many considerable road blocks in regards to having people outside of the school staff come and volunteer, especially if it requires any indoor work (due to COVID). This includes limiting the amount of special events and fundraisers. I've had hope of organizing volunteer work days several times, only to have it met with COVID restrictions. I'm still hopeful that there can be volunteer work days in the spring and summers to attract families to volunteer.

Although it is difficult to live on an AmeriCorps service stipend, it has been more than worth it to me. I am constantly energized and stimulated by this work, and look forward to the work that is to come with the spring. My time with the students is a sweet time, and I am happy in my role as a teacher that provides some class time for the students to explore different and new things. The students always have so much fun working in the garden, even if it's just moving piles of mulch, raking leaves, or weeding. They also have been great with all of the nutrition education activities and games, and of course love taste tests! I'm grateful that I've been able to teach in-person so far, and hope that good luck continues. My time in this position has turned me into an AmeriCorps proselytizer, encouraging anyone who might be interested to serve!